

JENKINS, PHILIP D

DRAWN 192

Artists-J

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Artists of Abraham Lincoln portraits

Philip O. Jenkins

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection



THE COVER: Robert E. Lee wears the uniform in which he surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant in a photograph taken eight days later, on April 17, 1865, by Mathew Brady. An article on Lee's most audacious victory, Chancellorsville, begins on page 20. The two Civil War-era lithographs shown on the cover depict a Union ironclad doing battle on the Mississippi and the assassination of Lincoln.

CIVIL WAR

C·H·R·O·N·I·C·L·E·S

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"THE GREAT ARROGANCE OF THE PRESENT IS TO FORGET THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE PAST"

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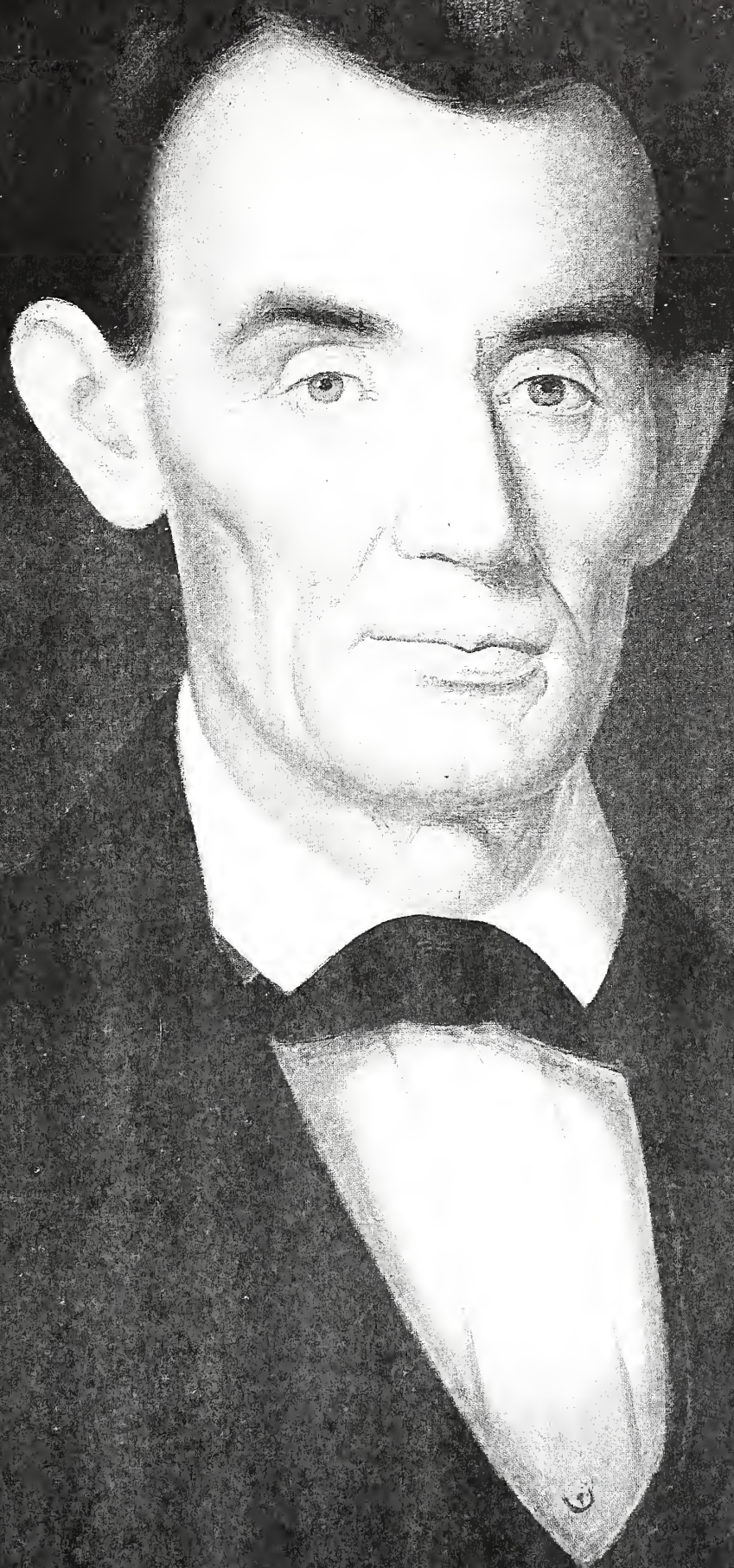
Serious postwar tensions within the Union army disappeared in one happy stroke that gave the United States its grandest pageant.

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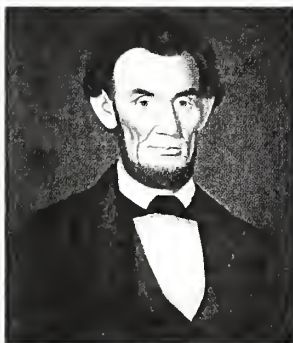
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LINCOLN FROM LIFE

by James L. Swanson and Lloyd Ostendorf



On the opposite page:
The earliest portrait
of Lincoln done from
life is published
here for the first
time. It was painted
in 1856 by Philip
O. Jenkins, who years
later painted the
adaptation above.

Recently two scholars working separately uncovered a pair of previously unknown portraits of Abraham Lincoln. One of them—which seems to put us in the very presence of the man—turned out to be the first ever painted.

Until recently historians believed that Abraham Lincoln was not painted before 1860, the year artists hurried to Springfield to produce likenesses of the presidential candidate. But in the summer of 1988 a lost portrait of Abraham Lincoln turned up on a farm in his home state of Illinois. Painted in 1856 by the itinerant artist Philip O. Jenkins, the newly discovered canvas captures the face of Lincoln the lawyer, political leader, and prominent citizen. It is the best portrait of Lincoln from the era that Carl Sandburg called the prairie years, and it is the only portrait of Lincoln before he was nationally known.

The discovery of the earliest portrait of Abraham Lincoln was, by itself, an important event, but an equally remarkable discovery followed. A few months later, in the fall of 1988, another lost portrait of Lincoln by Jenkins came to light. This second canvas, painted several years after the first, depicts a bearded Lincoln as President. Like the beardless portrait, it was still in the

hands of a descendant of the original owner. After a yearlong research odyssey through attics, archives, and museums, Philip Jenkins's matching portraits have been brought together, and each helps solve the mystery of the other.

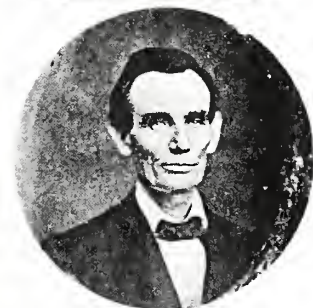
The trail began at a Chicago antiques show. A dealer exhibiting a large oil portrait of Lincoln from the 1864 presidential campaign mentioned casually that he knew of an even better Lincoln painting. According to the dealer, the woman who sold the campaign portrait to him claimed that an ancestor of hers knew Lincoln and had painted a picture of him before he was elected President. The portrait, which the dealer was unable to acquire, still hung in the front parlor of the owner's home in central Illinois.

The story sounded far-fetched. The majority of Lincoln's sittings for artists were well documented, and the chance that an unknown pre-presidential portrait was still out there, waiting to be discovered, was slim. The picture was probably just a colored lithograph or print complete with a family history that consisted more of wish-

BOTH PAGES: PRIVATE COLLECTION

Who was Jenkins? Why did he paint Lincoln four years before his nomination for the Presidency? Did Lincoln sit for him or did Jenkins copy a photograph?

Lincoln as he appeared in photographs taken around the time Jenkins painted his portrait. Top: N. H. Shepherd's 1846 daguerreotype. Center: An 1857 ambrotype. Bottom: An ambrotype taken May 7, 1858.



ful thinking than fact. Yet the story *could* be true. Unknown Lincoln documents still turn up occasionally in Illinois, the state where Lincoln once said he had "passed from a young to an old man." Descendants of many of Lincoln's friends still live in Illinois, and a few of them cherish historic pieces that no outsider has seen.

The story of the oil portrait was intriguing enough to lead one of the authors, James Swanson, to travel to a red-brick farmhouse in the heart of Lincoln country. The owner of the portrait was eager to receive a visitor who wanted to talk history, and sitting on a shaded porch, she recounted the story of her family and her painting over iced tea and Popsicles. She was eighty-six years old and had lived on her farm since she was a child. Her grandfather, William Henry Mann, who built the farmhouse, had served as an officer in an Illinois infantry regiment during the Civil War. According to family history, his brother-in-law, a "Dr. Jenkins," was a physician and amateur artist who had painted family portraits as well as a portrait of Abraham Lincoln. In 1912 her mother had discovered ten or twelve portraits by Jenkins in the attic. All were unframed and rolled up and had suffered water damage. Her mother threw some of the portraits out and saved six—portraits of William Henry Mann, his wife, his brother, and one of his sons, a portrait of the artist's son, and one of Abraham Lincoln. These portraits were stretched, framed, and displayed in the house, where they hung as she spoke.

After an hour or so she led the way inside. The house was kept dark to make it cool, and as she walked into the dimly lit front parlor, the walnut furniture, nineteenth-century wallpaper, hanging oil chandelier, and musty scent set the mood for Grandfather Mann to stroll into the room wearing his Civil War captain's uniform.

Grandfather Mann was nowhere to be seen, but another presence filled the room. There, at the end of the parlor, was Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth President of the United States. But this was not bearded Father Abraham, the Great Emancipator and Civil War President. It was the image of another man, Abe Lincoln of Illinois,

prominent lawyer and ambitious politician. The canvas captured Lincoln as he would have looked in his office, in court, or at a political event on any day in the 1850s—clean-shaven, wearing a dark frock coat, white shirt, and tie. The portrait possessed an intangible lifelike quality that was difficult to describe.

The portrait's owner knew little about the man who painted it, not even his first name. Nor did she know when Jenkins had painted any of the pictures. Not one was signed on the front, but in the nineteenth century many artists signed portraits on the back of the canvas. One by one she removed the portraits from the wall. Grandfather Mann's was signed "P. O. Jenkins/1856." His wife's portrait was unmarked, probably because Jenkins had painted it simultaneously with her husband's and signed only one of the pair. The portrait of William, the artist's son, was inscribed "Willie Jenkins/by his Pa/Bards Town, KY/Dec. 1867." The Lincoln portrait was the last to come down. It was signed: "Dr. P. O. Jenkins/Pinxit/May 1856."

The inscription was startling. If Jenkins had painted Lincoln in the summer or fall of 1860, the discovery of his unrecorded portrait would be significant. However, if Jenkins had painted Lincoln in 1856, his canvas was not merely another rare campaign portrait but the very first portrait of Abraham Lincoln ever painted.

The portrait prompted a string of questions. Who was P. O. Jenkins? Why did he paint Lincoln four years before his nomination for the Presidency? Did Lincoln sit for the portrait, or did Jenkins copy a photograph, a practice common among nineteenth-century artists? Did Jenkins sign the Lincoln and other portraits in his own hand, or did a family member add the inscriptions later to identify the paintings? Did other Jenkins portraits exist?

A thorough search of the attic produced no more paintings and no documents pertaining to Abraham Lincoln, P. O. Jenkins, or any of the portraits hanging downstairs. The attic yielded thousands of family letters, photographs, and documents, but not one dated before the 1870s. Fortunately the paintings themselves provided valuable clues about the artist.

The information on the Willie Jenkins portrait

indicated that he and his father either lived in or visited Bardstown, Kentucky, in 1867. The December date suggested that they lived there. Itinerant artists in nineteenth-century America often holed up at home for the winter and traveled in spring and summer, when the climate was more hospitable and the roads easier. If P. O. Jenkins painted a portrait in Bardstown in the middle of winter, Kentucky was probably his home.

The census records for the counties in western Kentucky confirmed that suspicion and provided new information on the artist and his family. The federal census revealed that the *P* stood for "Philip" and confirmed that he was related to the Manns. Jenkins and William Henry Mann were brothers-in-law; Philip married William's sister, Jemima Jane, on August 20, 1845, in Columbia, Kentucky. Between 1840 and 1867 Jenkins lived in Hardin, Boyle, and Christian counties, Kentucky. The federal census for Boyle County taken in August 1850 records Jenkins's age as thirty-three and his occupation as "painter." The 1860 census for Christian County lists him as "portrait painter." Jenkins probably traveled to central Illinois occasionally to visit his wife's family, and he must have been in Illinois in the spring of 1856, when he painted his brother-in-law, his sister-in-law, and Abraham Lincoln.

If Jenkins listed his occupation as an artist in the 1850 and 1860 census records, he had probably painted a fair number of portraits during those years. Queries to museums across the country turned up two more portraits that provided additional clues. In 1868 Jenkins painted a portrait of Dr. John Warner from the town of Clinton, Illinois—further evidence that Jenkins traveled between Kentucky and Illinois. In November 1874 Jenkins painted a portrait of Benjamin Helm Bristow, U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, in Washington, D.C. The November date suggested that Jenkins had moved to the national capital. Since Bristow was a public figure, correspondence between artist and subject might have survived. A trip to the Library of Congress, the repository of Bristow's papers, would provide the answer. There, amid thousands of pages of correspondence, were two handwritten letters from Jenkins to Bristow, including the very one inviting him to sit for the portrait:

205 A St. SE

Washington, D.C., June 30, 1874

My Dear Sir.

... I take this method of inviting you to call at my Studio at your earliest convenience, to see the portrait I have painted of Senator Logan of Illinois.

As already indicated to you, I desire to paint a likeness of you, for my Studio as soon as you can command the leisure to sit for me. Could you call, say tomorrow or next day, at 5 or 6 P.M? . . .

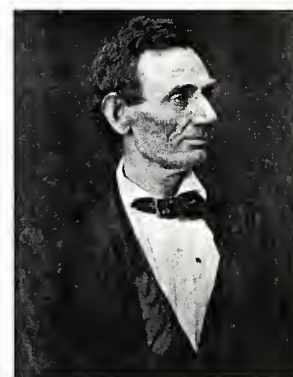
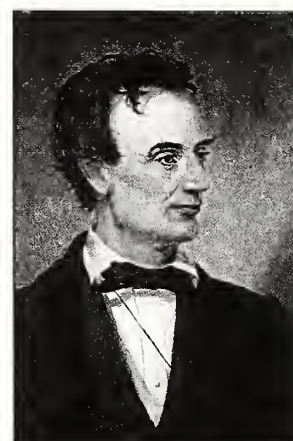
Very Respectfully Yours,
P. O. Jenkins

The letter to Secretary Bristow revealed several important pieces of information about its author: It disclosed that Jenkins painted a now-lost portrait of John A. Logan, the Illinois senator and former Civil War general; it authenticated Jenkins's signature on the Lincoln and other portraits discovered at the Mann family home—he signed the letter and portrait with the same distinctive handwriting—and, finally, it provided insights into the way Jenkins conducted his business. The invitation for Bristow to sit for a portrait "for my Studio" suggested that Jenkins solicited prominent men to pose for likenesses that he then kept and displayed to advertise his connections and talent to less illustrious clients.

Washington, D.C., city directories confirmed that Jenkins lived at 205 A Street, SE, in 1874 and 1875, but the directories for subsequent years suggested that he did not prosper. He lived at eight different addresses, and he never had a studio outside his home. In some years he failed to have himself listed in the business section of the directory. On one occasion he even reverted to listing himself as a physician. Philip Jenkins died in August 1892 at the age of seventy-five.

Although James Swanson didn't know it at the time, another Lincoln student, Lloyd Ostendorf, had discovered a second portrait of Lincoln by Jenkins and was also on the artist's trail. Neither of us realized that he had discovered one of a pair of portraits by the same artist. Instead, we pursued our research independently.

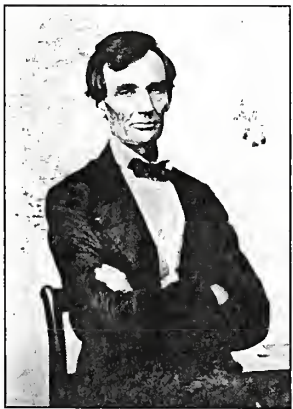
Lloyd Ostendorf's book on Lincoln photographs led the owner of the second portrait to write to him about the painting. According to the owner, the painting belonged to his ancestor James Primm of Lincoln, Illinois. Primm, a land speculator, was the most prominent citizen in Logan County, Illinois, and served as clerk of the court, recorder, and postmaster. Family tradition claimed that Primm was a friend of Abraham Lincoln, and among the family papers was a loan guarantee in Abraham Lincoln's own hand that confirmed the story. The portrait was signed by Jenkins twice on the back of the canvas and dated 1866. The painting was in pristine condi-



Until now, Thomas Hicks's portrait (top), painted in June 1860, was believed to be the first life portrait. Although Lincoln sat for Hicks, the artist also worked from a photograph of his subject (above) taken by Alexander Hesler earlier that month.

*I*t is unlikely that Lincoln commissioned the Jenkins portrait. Although a willing subject for artists and photographers, he was not vain enough to seek them out.

In preparation for his miniature on ivory (top), painted from life in August 1860, John Henry Brown hired a photographer to take pictures of Lincoln. Brown based his portrait on the photograph shown below.



tion and still in its original walnut frame. The canvas was nailed to the wood stretcher with the original copper nails. Even the stretcher was signed "P. O. Jenkins" in pencil.

Ostendorf didn't know what to make of the portrait. He had studied the face of Abraham Lincoln for more than fifty years, and his instincts told him that Jenkins may have enjoyed a life sitting with Lincoln. At the least the artist must have seen Lincoln in the flesh. The portrait was not copied from any known photograph, and it reflected an intimate familiarity with Lincoln's face and bone structure. But the portrait was dated 1866, the year *after* Lincoln's death. Ostendorf hypothesized that Jenkins had undertaken the portrait in 1865, when Lincoln was alive and available for sittings or at least observation, but did not complete the canvas until the following year.

The mystery of the bearded portrait was solved once the two portraits were brought together. Ostendorf's intuition that the bearded likeness reflected a life sitting turned out to be correct, but for a reason that he could not have imagined until the beardless portrait came to light. Although the bearded image was not painted until after Lincoln's death, it seemed to be from life because it was copied from the original life portrait that Jenkins had painted ten years earlier.

Unfortunately, the story of how Primm acquired the portrait is lost. It is likely that Primm and Jenkins met during one of the artist's trips to Illinois. Primm probably paid Jenkins to paint a portrait of the martyred President—and his former friend—for display in his home outside the town of Lincoln. Rather than create a portrait from scratch, Jenkins copied his earlier portrait, aged Lincoln's face, and added a beard. After James Primm died in 1872, the portrait passed down through several generations of Primms.

While both authors of this article knew that the beardless portrait was the source for the later work, we still knew little about the 1856 canvas. Would evidence support our belief that it was from life, or would we discover a photograph or print from which it was copied?

We had to satisfy ourselves at the outset that the portrait was actually painted in 1856. To do that, we needed to verify that Philip Jenkins himself had signed and dated the canvas. The inscrip-

tion was written in a distinctive cursive hand, and two particular letters, *P* and *J*, were quite stylized. Jenkins's letter to Benjamin Bristow and his signature on several other portraits, including the 1866 bearded Lincoln, confirmed that he had signed and dated the beardless portrait in his own hand. Furthermore, analysis of the signature under an ultraviolet lamp and an infrared video camera revealed that the inscription "Dr. P. O. Jenkins/Pinxit/May 1856" had not been altered or added to in any way. Satisfied with the authenticity of the inscription, we turned to the key question: Did Jenkins paint Lincoln from life?

There were only two possible ways that Philip Jenkins could have painted Abraham Lincoln in 1856—from a life sitting or by copying a photograph. Just two photographs of Lincoln existed in 1856, a daguerreotype made by N. H. Shepherd ten years earlier, when Lincoln had been elected to Congress, and an ambrotype or daguerreotype taken in 1854. Jenkins's portrait bears no resemblance to either one. By process of elimination, a portrait of Lincoln painted in 1856 must have been from life.

Even if the canvas had not been dated 1856, we still would have concluded two things about the portrait: First, Jenkins must have painted it before November 1860. Once Lincoln grew a beard in November, there was no reason to paint him without one. The artist Jesse Atwood added a beard to Lincoln's face within weeks of completing his beardless portrait, and sheet-music publishers and printmakers like Currier and Ives slapped makeshift beards on their beardless prints to satisfy the public demand for current images of the new President. Second, Jenkins must have painted the portrait from life. Comparing the portrait side by side with each of the 128 known photographs of Lincoln made it obvious that Jenkins had not copied any of them. Nor is it likely that his portrait is based on a composite. It is almost impossible for an artist to consult several photographs and then paint a lifelike portrait that does not resemble any of them. Lincoln portraitists who relied on photographs, including Thomas Hicks and John Henry Brown, always used one specific image as a model. It is, of

course, possible that he might have worked from a photograph now lost, but there are two existing portraits of other subjects that we know Jenkins painted from photographs, and they are clumsy and distorted.

Ultimately the most vivid evidence that Lincoln sat for Jenkins was the quality of the portrait itself. Unlike many other Lincoln portraits, Jenkins's Lincoln is not frozen in a studied, idealized pose. The hint of a smile looks natural. The artist captured his subject's lantern jaw, cleft chin, and deep eye sockets with remarkable accuracy. He recorded the long vertical wrinkles in the cheeks and the mole on Lincoln's right cheek, as well as wrinkles beside and below the eyes. He did not try to modify Lincoln's big ears or irregularly shaped lips but painted them realistically. Finally, Jenkins painted Lincoln's eyes their true color, an unusual hue that Lincoln called gray but that others who knew him described as hazel or green-gray.

Months of research had confirmed the emotional response we both felt the first time each of us laid eyes on the beardless portrait. We were standing in the presence of Abraham Lincoln, and the artist who painted him must have stood there too, more than 130 years ago.

Why did Jenkins paint Lincoln? It was unlikely that Lincoln commissioned Philip Jenkins to paint his portrait. Although Lincoln proved a willing subject for artists and photographers, he was not vain enough to seek them out. It is more likely that Jenkins approached Lincoln and requested a sitting, planning to keep the portrait for his personal studio to attract new clients.

By 1856 Lincoln's fame was more than sufficient to attract a local artist. That spring Lincoln was forty-seven years old, a leader of the Illinois bar and a well-known political activist. He had served four terms in the Illinois legislature and one term in the United States Congress and had run for the United States Senate in 1855. In May of 1856 he attended a political convention in Bloomington, Illinois, where he delivered what became known as the "lost speech," a pro-Union address so moving that spellbound reporters forgot to transcribe his words.

Lincoln's Kentucky heritage may also have attracted Jenkins. Lincoln was born in western Kentucky. Jenkins lived in that region and may have come in contact with Lincoln's relatives. Finally, Lincoln's looks may have intrigued Jenkins. Abraham Lincoln possessed a remarkably expressive face that looked different in almost every portrait or photograph made of him. He could appear ugly or handsome, unkempt or elegant, in-

formal or solemn. Contemporary accounts by those who knew Lincoln frequently reveal a fascination with his physical appearance.

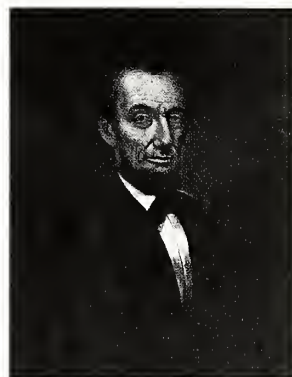
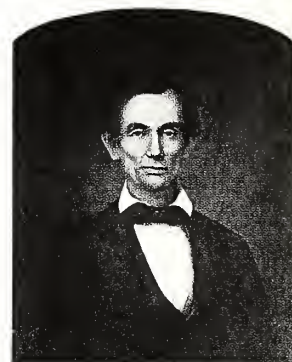
When and where did the sitting take place? The history books record no sitting with an artist in the month of May 1856. That in itself meant little with respect to the authenticity of the painting since much of Lincoln's everyday life in Illinois has been lost to history. The chronologies may tell us when he visited a town, gave a speech, or tried a case, but they do not tell us how he filled all his days and nights. There was no reason to record Lincoln's every move before he was nominated for the Presidency.

We know Lincoln spent most of May 1856 traveling throughout the Eighth Judicial Circuit, trying cases in central Illinois. He was in Pekin from April 28 through May 11, in Clinton between May 12 and May 15, in Shelbyville on May 16 and 17, in Urbana from the nineteenth through the twenty-third, in Danville from the twenty-fourth through the twenty-seventh, in Decatur on the twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth, and in Bloomington for the state Anti-Nebraska convention on the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth. On May 30 Lincoln returned home to Springfield, where he spent the last two days of the month. Philip Jenkins and Abraham Lincoln could have crossed paths in any one of these towns.

Perhaps someday more information on Philip Jenkins and his portraits of Abraham Lincoln will turn up. An unknown letter from Jenkins to Lincoln, the artist's diary, the missing portrait of Senator Logan, or even a photograph of Philip Jenkins may still await discovery. The chance of finding any of these items may seem remote, but then so were the odds of discovering the first life portrait of Abraham Lincoln more than 130 years after it was painted.

Of course, the most remarkable thing of all was that the Illinois prairie lawyer of uncertain prospects who sat for his portrait in 1856 went on to become the greatest President in American history. Thanks to Philip Jenkins, we have the only portrait of Abraham Lincoln before history claimed him, as he has not been seen for more than a century. ★

James L. Swanson is a Lincoln collector and writes about the Presidents, copyright law, the entertainment industry, and the First Amendment. Lloyd Ostendorf, a Lincoln artist and collector, is the author of *Lincoln in Photographs: An Album of Every Known Pose*.



George Frederick Wright's life portrait (top), painted in August of 1860, idealized Lincoln's features. Lincoln liked the results so much he purchased the work. Jesse Atwood painted Lincoln clean-shaven in November 1860. When the President grew a beard a few weeks later, Atwood added one to his portrait (above).

JENKINS, PHILIP D

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Artists-J

